



*Dancer Judith Jamison performs in Cry for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.*

*Photograph by MAX WALDMAN, 1976, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Carol Gruenke, Max Walden Archives.*

# Women of Our Time

By MEGHAN LOFTUS

Photography exhibition celebrates women who challenged and changed America.

**T**he Smithsonian Institution's exhibition, "Women of Our Time: Twentieth-Century Photographs from the National Portrait Gallery," celebrated women from all walks of life whose achievements have changed the course of U.S. history.

The exhibition, which closed on February 1, included 90 photographs of women activists, artists, athletes and others.

"We have a panoply of women's ideas, struggles and achievements in the 20th century," says Martin Sullivan, director of the gallery.

"When the century opened, most American women did not even have the right to vote, much less hold public office. But by its close, all that had changed....Most of the women represented in this exhibition were affected by this remarkable transformation, and many of their distinctions were largely shaped by the century's increasingly open-ended environment for achievement by women. But more important, many of these individuals were themselves significant instruments in creating that environment," states the National Portrait Gallery Web site.

Nineteen female photographers were showcased in the exhibition, which celebrated not

only women but the art of photography as well. The exhibition began as a traveling show when the National Portrait Gallery was closed for renovation from 2000 to 2006. As it crisscrossed the United States, the show acquired more photographs along the way.

The photographs were arranged in chronological order through six rooms. Mentors and those who followed in their footsteps appeared practically side by side. Carl Van Vechten's likeness of Bessie Smith, a great blues singer, was followed a few rooms down the hall by Linda McCartney's photograph of Janis Joplin, a rock singer who cited Smith as one of her influences. Alice Paul, a leader in the women's suffrage movement in the 1920s, served as a model for modern feminists Susan Faludi and Gloria Steinem, whose joint portrait was the exhibition's final image.

## Choosing the subjects

"There were people on an informal list" of possible subjects for the show, says Ann M. Shumard, the curator of "Women of Our Time." Madam C.J. Walker, founder of a beauty empire in the early 20th century and the first African American woman to make \$1 million, was on that list. But the gallery did not have an image of Walker to display in the original exhibition—which is surprising,



*Author of the children's classic Goodnight Moon, Margaret Wise Brown wrote more than 100 books.*

*Photograph by PHILIPPE HALSMAN, 1946 National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Steve Bello in memory of Jane Halsman Bello.*





*Above: Celebrity chef Julia Child who introduced French cooking to Americans with her bestselling cookbook Mastering the Art of French Cooking and her TV appearances.*

*Photograph by HANS NAMUTH, 1977, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of the Estate of Hans Namuth.*

*Right: Virginia Apgar, who was the first full professor of medicine at Columbia University. She developed a simple, quick method for determining a newborn's health.*

*Photograph by ANN ZANE SHANKS, 1966, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.*



*Amelia Earhart made history as the first woman pilot to fly solo over the Atlantic Ocean in 1932.*

*Photograph by unidentified artist, Acme Newspapers, Inc., 1936, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.*



*Helen Keller became deaf, blind and mute due to a childhood illness, but learned to read Braille, speak and write. In 1904, she graduated cum laude from Radcliffe College and visited India in 1955.*

*Photograph by CHARLES WHITMAN, 1904, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.*



since the photograph sought by Shumard was used in hundreds of print advertisements and appeared on Walker's cosmetic products.

"Publicity images don't always survive," says Shumard. "They were used for publications and then they disappeared." Shumard finally tracked down a print of Walker and was about to bid on it at an art auction in New York City when Walker's great-granddaughter, A'Lelia Bundles, donated the likeness that hung in the exhibition's main hall.

Acquisitions are dictated by what is available on the market, but sometimes the museum scores an unexpected find, like the photograph of actress Marilyn Monroe donated by Navy medic David Geary. He had a front-row seat at Monroe's 1954 performance for U.S. troops stationed in Korea. The image, one of the few color photographs in the exhibition, captures Monroe in a moment of personal triumph, thriving on the crowd's energy.

Susan Johann's photograph of playwright Wendy Wasserstein also catches a candid, personal moment: Johann photographed Wasserstein right after it was announced that Wasserstein had won the Pulitzer Prize for her play *The Heidi Chronicles*. The picture shows Wasserstein in a state of disbelief. "I love the fact that it just captures her at this completely sort of informal moment," Shumard says.

*Judy Garland's starring role as Dorothy in the 1939 film The Wizard of Oz is the most fondly remembered of her long acting and singing career.*

*Photograph by BOB WILLOUGHBY, 1954 (printed in 1977), National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bob Willoughby.*







*Above left: Eleanor Roosevelt was one of the most active first ladies in U.S. history, promoting equal rights for women and minorities. She visited India in 1952.*

*Photograph by CLARA SIPPRELL, 1949, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Bequest of Phyllis Fenner.*

*Above right: A maternity nurse in Manhattan in the early 1900s, Margaret Sanger worked to remove legal barriers to disseminating information about contraception. She visited India in 1935.*

*Photograph by IRA L. HILL, 1917, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Margaret Sanger Lampe and Nancy Sanger Pallesen, granddaughters of Margaret Sanger.*

*Left: Madam C.J. Walker, the first African American woman to become a millionaire, founded a beauty empire in the early 20th century.*

*Photograph by ADDISON SCURLOCK, 1914, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of A'Lelia Bundles/Walker family.*

## Women in action

Many of the photographs capture their subjects at work and in motion. “It’s not always easy to find an image of a celebrated or important figure actually doing the thing they do,” Shumard says. An exquisitely composed photograph of dancer Judith Jamison showcases her fluid movements in *Cry*, which Jamison starred in during her tenure with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Virginia Apgar, the first full professor of medicine at Columbia University in New York and creator of the Apgar test for infant viability, was shown examining a minutes-old child in the hospital. Helen Wills Moody, the tennis champion who did not lose a set in singles play for six years, was photographed just before she

backhanded the ball.

The studio images can be just as arresting. An elegant Carolina Herrera, fashion designer and style icon, stands tall in a photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe. The first woman to hold a U.S. Cabinet position, Frances Perkins, was photographed in her signature pearls, but without her three-cornered hat, a wardrobe staple during her term as President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s secretary of labor.

“This exhibition can’t begin to be a comprehensive look at every woman who has played an important role in the 20th century,” Shumard says. “Our collection is a work in progress.”



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*Novelist and essayist Susan Sontag was a prominent analyst of popular American culture.*

*Photograph by PETER HUJAR, 1975, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.*